

Classroom Speaking Activities

By Yang Shuying

As is often the case in second language teaching, speaking activities are offered to compensate for the lack of communicative opportunities in the students' environments. In recent years, more and more non-English majors have been enjoying such an advantage in China. Consequently, the need for English teachers has increased, especially at colleges and universities.

Teaching oral English classes gave me an excellent opportunity to organize a communicative English class. I began by analyzing the learning background of my students and trying to find a way to eliminate the students' psychological barriers so they would speak voluntarily in class. This article discusses some activities I used to encourage speaking in my classes.

Language Learning Background

Chinese students are very self-conscious when asked to express their views in public. This is true even if their language abilities are comparatively good.

Due to the large class size in high schools and the emphasis on examinations, students learn language skills so they can pass tests. Therefore, developing students' communicative abilities is not emphasized. As a result, college students are not as competent in speaking, and almost all have difficulties in pronunciation. This makes them unwilling to communicate in the target language for fear of being ridiculed.

Since most language teaching in China still focuses on national tests, language is treated as a knowledge subject—analyzed, explained, and practiced in much the same way as other subjects. The communicative skills, which require learners to practice in real situations, are totally ignored. Oral English is taught and learned mostly in reading and reciting activities.

Since their previous experiences had inhibited the students, I initially concentrated on teaching them correct pronunciation to improve their confidence.

I also focused on motivating my students. According to psychologist Hebb (1992:260), "It is motivation that initiates behavior, directs it, and is also responsible for its cessation," and "motivation can be triggered by outside factors." To do this, I told students at the beginning of the course that 50% of their final score would be based on their in-class participation. Those who spoke in every class would get the higher scores, regardless of what their utterances might be. Hoping to increase their grades, the students eagerly began speaking in class, making the class lively.

Classroom Activities

However, scores are rarely enough to motivate the students. According to cognitive theory, it is intrinsic motivation that generally directs people's behavior. So I designed interesting and

meaningful activities to motivate students so that they would participate voluntarily in the activities.

Using the materials from English books edited by the foreign language department at Dalian Maritime University, I created challenging tasks for the students. For example, the main idea of one text was smoking, so students had to summarize and explain the text. Then, I assigned group activities. Group one practiced an interview between a journalist and several customers buying cigarettes in a drug store. Their task was to discuss how cigarettes harmed people's health. In group two, the task was to discuss the reasons why many people smoke and what benefits smokers think they get from smoking. Group three had a role play situation in which a boy tries to persuade his girlfriend to start smoking. The last group debated the pros and cons of banning smoking in public places.

In a second activity, I introduced the topic of expensive weddings to my students, asking each to imagine his/her own wedding and give his/her personal view on luxurious weddings.

Often, romantic relationships can be a discussion topic. In one lesson, related to a text on marriage, I had the class form three groups to debate the problem. Everyone discussed the topic enthusiastically, but they did not have to reveal their personal experiences.

Teachers can also use any unexpected occurrence that happens during class. No matter how interesting the class may be, some students become distracted by outside noises, sights, even changes in the weather. Whenever I notice this happening, I try to attract the students' attention. Once while preparing for a discussion, I noticed a student gazing outside. In following his line of sight, I saw a colorful setting sun. It was so beautiful that I asked the whole class to enjoy the beautiful sight and the distracted student to describe it.

Conclusion

Although classroom activities are usually based on texts, I have tried to create activities that provide students with speaking opportunities and at the same time, motivate them. To accomplish this, I have used themes of interest to my students that stimulate discussions and debates, and that overcome students' fears of speaking.

References

Hebb, D. 1992. Classroom connections. In Windows on the classroom. Ed. P. Egge and D. Kauchak. Educational Psychology.

Yang Shuying teaches English at Dalian Naval Academy in China